

The Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war in the Pacific quickly came to a close, and the United States found itself in the position of being the only global nuclear power. While there is no question as to what happened, over the past sixty years there has been much debate over whether or not the United States should have used this weapon.

1947

Immediately following World War II, U.S. history textbooks focused on the role of the atomic bombs in hurrying the end of the war. Few, if any, considered the bombs' impact on Japanese civilians, or dared to raise the question of their necessity in bringing the war to a close.

The Japanese war came to a climax early in 1945. The bloody conquests of Iwo Jima and Okinawa gave bases either for the direct invasion of Japan or for landings in China. The Chinese were having better success on the mainland. The end of the European war released large British and

American naval units, and also large and experienced armies. Russia finally declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria. The United States unveiled its newest weapon, the atomic bomb, demonstrating twice—first at Hiroshima and then at Nagasaki—that a good-sized city could almost be erased from the map in one blinding flash. Confronted by this combination of forces Japan surrendered August 14—the formal surrender being accepted by General MacArthur on September 2, 1945.¹⁹

1954

As the nuclear arms race went into full swing, this text appeared to focus primarily on the development of the bombs themselves, somewhat apart from the broader strategic questions of their role in ending the war.

The Atomic Bomb

The real meaning of the ultimatum was made clear on August 6, 1945, when an American superfortress dropped a new kind of bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The possibility of the development of an atomic bomb had been clearly established by scientific discoveries made in 1939. Shortly after the United States became involved in the war, the development of the bomb was undertaken as a top-secret military project.

Leading atomic scientists of the world, including some who had come to this country as refugees from Axis oppression, were engaged in the project. In July, 1945, a test bomb was successfully exploded at Los Alamos, New Mexico. President Truman fully recognized the fearful potentialities of such a weapon. He considered its use justifiable as a means of bringing about a rapid conclusion of the war.

The single bomb dropped over Hiroshima, a city of 375,000, had an explosive power equal to that of twenty thousand tons of TNT. At one blow, the heart of the city was destroyed and three fifths of its population wiped out. Two days later a second and more powerful bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki. One-third of the city was destroyed.²⁰

1966

Still in the shadow of the Cuban Missile Crisis, students in the mid-1960s had to contemplate the possibility of a nuclear war. This selection let students know that a nuclear holocaust might be the end result, if a "lasting peace" was not found.

On August 6, 1945, the first atomic bomb used in warfare was dropped from an American airplane onto the city of Hiroshima in Japan. Three days later, a second bomb fell on Nagasaki, another Japanese city. More than 150,000 Japanese died in the resulting holocausts. Thousands of others suffered dreadful after effects.

In February 1947, in *Harper's Magazine*, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson wrote about the decision to use the bombs:

"The face of war is the face of death; death is an inevitable part of any order that a wartime leader gives. . . . War in the twentieth century has grown steadily more barbarous, more destructive, more debased in all its aspects. Now, with the release of atomic energy, man's ability to destroy himself is very nearly complete. The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended a war. They also made it wholly clear that we must never have another war. This is the lesson men and leaders everywhere must learn, and I believe that when they learn it they will find a way to lasting peace. There is no other choice."²¹

1995

In 1995, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, came under attack for its display of the airplane that dropped the original atomic bomb on Hiroshima—the Enola Gay. Critics claimed that the exhibit was actually antiwar and brought into question the use of this bomb to end the war. The Smithsonian left the Enola Gay on display, yet with little or no interpretations attached—a stand it seems many textbooks have agreed with since 1945. Students in this 1990s' text, however, were given a number of possible interpretations as to why the bomb was used.

Triumph and Tragedy in the Pacific

The defeat of Japan was now only a matter of time. The United States had three possible ways to proceed. The military favored a full-scale inva-

sion, beginning on the southernmost island of Kyushu in November 1945 and culminating with an assault on Honshu (the main island of Japan) and a climatic battle for Tokyo in 1946; casualties were expected to run into the hundreds of thousands. Diplomats suggested a negotiated peace, urging the United States to modify the unconditional surrender formula to permit Japan to retain the institution of the emperor. At Potsdam, Churchill and Truman did issue a call for surrender, warning Japan it faced utter destruction, but they made no mention of the emperor. . . .

Weather conditions on the morning of August 6 dictated the choice of Hiroshima as the bomb's target. The explosion incinerated 4 square miles of the city, instantly killing more than sixty thousand. Two days later, Russia entered the war against Japan, and the next day, August 9, the United States dropped a second bomb on Nagasaki. There were no more atomic bombs available, but no more were needed. The emperor personally broke a deadlock in the Japanese cabinet and persuaded his ministers to surrender unconditionally on August 14, 1945. Three weeks later, Japan signed a formal capitulation agreement on the decks of the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay to bring World War II to its official close.

Many years later, scholars charged that Truman had more in mind than defeating Japan when he decided to use the atomic bomb. Citing air force and naval officers who claimed Japan could be defeated by a blockade or by conventional air attacks, these revisionists suggested the real reason for dropping the bomb was to impress the Soviet Union with the fact that the United States had exclusive possession of the ultimate weapon. The available evidence indicates that while Truman and his associates were aware of the possible effect on the Soviet Union, their primary motive was to end World War II as quickly and effortlessly as possible. The saving of American lives, along with a desire for revenge for Pearl Harbor, were uppermost in the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet in using the atomic bomb to defeat Japan, the United States virtually guaranteed a postwar arms race with the Soviet Union.²²